

Op-Ed/Editorials - Making the call: Gambling helplines in the U.S.

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The theme of the 2006 Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders annual conference on gambling addiction was Lost in Translation? The Challenge of Turning Good Research into Best Practice. During the next few weeks, The BASIS is pleased to present a series of editorials from some of the faculty members of that conference. In this week's editorial, Christine Reilly discusses a brief survey of gambling helplines in the United States.

Christine Reilly

Executive Director Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders

One of the most visible resources for individuals concerned about their gambling is the helpline or hotline. Toll-free helpline numbers are often posted in casinos, printed on lottery tickets, and featured in public services announcements on television and radio. The quality of care offered by helplines or any other intervention should be a priority. That is why the Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders and the National Center for Responsible Gaming presented a session on helplines at the 2006 NCRG Conference on Gambling and Addiction in November. A search of the scientific literature revealed that very little had been written about helplines for disordered gamblers, and, therefore, the Division on Addictions faculty and staff conducted a brief survey of gambling helplines in the U.S. in order to provide background for the conference panel. The findings of this survey suggest possible directions for future research and evaluation, especially in the area of helpline personnel.

We gathered the data through a telephone survey with 27 gambling helplines and a review of materials available online (1). Helpline administrators were asked about the credentials and training of helpline personnel; nature of services provided; geographical scope; funding sources; advertising sources; and volume of calls. We found that nearly all gambling helplines offer the same services, including distribution of educational materials, referrals to Gamblers Anonymous and treatment professionals, and crisis counseling. It is interesting that this near unanimity on the purpose of a helpline was not matched by the responses to

questions about credentials and training of helpline personnel. Although all of the respondents require some sort of training for the staff answering helpline calls, there was no agreement on other aspects of personnel qualifications. Nearly 50 percent had no educational requirements while 25 percent required a graduate degree (e.g., master's degree), 21 percent a four-year college degree and 8 percent a high school degree. For 50 percent of the helplines, certification and/or licensure is mandatory and only one-third provide clinical supervision. Clearly, there is no consensus about what constitutes the ideal qualifications and training needs for a helpline worker. While some maintain that a paid staff with graduate training in a clinical specialty should be the standard, other helplines use volunteers with little or no education other than in-house training. It might be useful for the organizations that sponsor helplines to revisit the issue of educational qualifications and training needs of their personnel. The recent explosion of new research on gambling has made this an opportune time to re-evaluate strategies for assisting individuals with a gambling problem (Shaffer, et al., 2006). As new research changes our understanding of the disorder, we will need to adjust intervention, prevention and treatment strategies accordingly. Fortunately, there will be new resources for this reappraisal. The Prairieland's Addiction Technology and Transfer Center at the University of Iowa recently launched a two-year study of the health care providers focused on gambling disorders. The operators of helplines could benefit from the findings and recommendations of this project. We encourage helpline operators to take advantage of the development of evidence-based resources and to keep in mind that the dictum, "First, do no harm," applies even to straightforward activities like disseminating educational materials.

For a copy of the PowerPoint presented at the 2006 NCRG Conference on Gambling and Addiction, contact Christine Reilly (Christine_reilly@hms.harvard.edu).

What do you think? Comments on this article can be addressed to Christine Reilly.

Notes

1. Jenna Tonet, research administrator coordinator for the Division on Addictions, conducted most of the interviews. Sarah Nelson, instructor of psychology in psychiatry, Harvard Medical School (HMS), and Howard Shaffer, associate professor of psychology in psychiatry, HMS, helped design the questionnaire and

analyzed the data.

References

Shaffer, H.J., Stanton, M.V., & Nelson, S.E. (2006). Trends in gambling studies research: quantifying, categorizing, and describing citations. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 22(4), 427-442.

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